

“Where Are You *Really* From?”: “Mapping” the South Asian Diasporic Through Poetic Inquiry

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Abstract

For the South Asian diasporic, questions about (be)longing and identity are almost undeniable. Through a personal reflection, I contour these experiences by way of poetic inquiry, specifically interrogating “performing” Canadian-ness (Alvi, 2020) and the meaning of “home” (Badrudjoja, 2006) that are a part of the living pedagogy of immigrant families navigating the “status” of emigration. It is in that intermediary of “straddling cultural divide” (Shariff, 2008) that words of poetry emerge, tantalizing a processual capitulation of (be)longing and identity formation; that is, the constant trail of navigating the in-between of “here nor there” and the (im)possibilities that this hyphenation offers.

From Memories of the Land to Poetry of the Diasporic

there is a trail of dirt inside of me.
it is the soil of my ancestors
formed into a makeshift map.
it is written on me like a birthmark
its edges as smooth as the callus of footprints
that follow me where I travel.



Fig. 1: Old photograph of my father's ancestral village.

In a family album, an old photograph of my father's ancestral village captures my attention, with dreams about a childhood that could have been and the one that I experienced away from the terrain, the dirt road of soil, long buried, but still etched into my memory. Even now, I can imagine myself running through the fields, stopping next to a sapodilla tree to catch my breath. The sweetness of the fruit, which at first is unfamiliar to my tongue, becomes a taste that I long for. As I enjoy the moment, it is my grandmother's stories—ones about this land—that remain the most prominent in my memories. She tells me about the way a tree is planted, settled into the soil, and nurtured by water. When we go home, I continue to be enamoured of how she and my grandfather turned a few acres of land into something more. With these experiences, while I do not know the word at that time, I start to feel the vastness of my (home)land.

As a child of immigrant parents from India, however, I am confronted with questions about whether I “belong” in so-called Canada and whether I am Indian “enough” in the homeland. Calling into question these identities are markedly disparaging and frame me as displaced. I am stifled at an impasse like Mohanty (2003), such that being South Asian comes with “a question of (in)visibility and foreignness” (p. 134)—and requires one to remain a stranger both in the homeland and in the new home (Trinh, 1991). These experiences have left me in a void, and I am looking to escape that nothingness. When the imaginative transport of an artist escapes, a lingering artefact remains somewhere in the periphery. It is that space of elsewhere stitched from memories of “neither here nor there” that I come to critical poetic inquiry as a marginalized being (Davis, 2018) in locating a living pedagogy (Aoki, 2003). It is also through this poetry that I respond with an arts-based approach to storying narratives of South Asian-ness in the diaspora as an artist, researcher, and teacher.

Examining the Question(s) of Being From “Here”

“Where are you from?”

“where are you from?”

and i tell them,

i am from here

but they ravage me

with disbelief, with more

questions that turn into

“you cannot possibly be from here...”

...so, where are you really from?”

While I cannot recall when I first encountered this question, my earliest memory of it is from high school, where questions about culture and ethnicity are framed in the classroom. It is in the opening slit of a conversation within that space where the perniciousness of the question emerges. It is another student, a white student, who asks me, "Where are you from?" and who then launches into an accusatory explanation that "my people" cannot be from Canada. Moreover, to claim otherwise goes against her [racist] definition of who belongs here and who does not. At the time, I did not understand the loaded nature behind this remark—of the history around the construction of racial bodies vis-à-vis colonialism that Ahmed (2002) attends to in her work. As the years would go by, as I try to make sense of such an accusation, I immediately turn to silence. The numbness paralyzes me from speaking, and that becomes a response on its own. By providing no answer at all, I engage in admitting that white people, as assumed by the question poser, are the "real" Canadians. Time and again, no matter how fleeting the moment, I am dissected by a question before I can even speak.

The question of "Where are you from?" reeks of a politics of futility that seeks to undermine those who are ascribed to the Global South, while also ignoring the duplicity of the white settler on stolen land. It is an exclusionary question that constructs a fictitious "Oriental Other" (Badrudodoja, 2006). As well, it is a reminder of identity denial (Cheryan & Monin, 2005), which emerges by way of the assumption that whiteness is the racial marker of normativity. In other words, to be otherwise is inherently different and unbelonging, and thus dismissed to being from somewhere else. My own experiences, as noted above, speak to being categorically trafficked in questions about being from "here"—questions that seek to place whiteness as dominant. Adding to this is the "Are you Canadian?" question (Shariff, 2008). When this question is framed, it is purveyed as innocent, but for me, as an Indian, it is archived in memories of erasure. According to Agnew (2003), "it implies that having a different skin colour (which is what usually prompts the question) makes a person an outsider and 'not really Canadian'" (p. 1). As such, the space of "here" becomes a contested one for the South Asian diasporic.

"Where are you really from?"

dirty. little. immigrant.
words that are whispered
scream to me in a deafening way
to remind me of the following:
you are not from here.

Gradually, the question turns from "Where are you from?" to "Where are you *really* from?". In my own experience, I can vividly recall being asked this question several times throughout my life. While those posing the question might be attempting to be culturally sensitive (Cheryan & Monin, 2005), I view it as an assault. When I articulate that I am from Montreal or that I am from Canada, other questions emerge such as, "What is your background?". And like Henry (2003), "I remember being asked the question, 'where are you from?', and when I said, 'Canada', the questions almost always continued, 'where are you *really* from?', 'where are you *originally* from?', 'where are your parents from?', or 'what are your origins?'" (p. 231). The response of "I am from here" never seems to suffice, but sometimes even the "desired" response is inadequate. When my response finally reveals that my family is from India, I am

informed that I am probably from Pakistan. Again, not only does the questioner ask a loaded question, but they also deny the response at every turn, even when the racist imagination is filled to the very end.

This is suffused in the problematics of satiating the appetite of the colonizer, whose curiosity turns to disbelief when the response does not fill the stomach of a vulture that is narrowing in on its prey. One question leads to another and then another, until the hunter supposedly becomes the hunted, where the person posing the questions feels a sense of disbelief and disorientation, as if the question of “Where are you from?” transported from the questioned to the questioner, who is upset with a response that does not fulfill the interrogator’s desire to know. These sentiments, whether said or unsaid, are marked through a barrage of questions. Even worse are the comments that accompany the questions. “Are people in India really that dirty?”, “Does it smell there?”, and “How do people there live in such poverty?” are some examples that I have been asked. Inevitably, the question turns into misrepresentations of being inferior and to being labelled as deficient in some manner. These are racist ascriptions and territorializations such as being conspicuously “dirty” (Gairola, 2016) along with racial slurs such as “curry-scented”, “Paki”, and “shit skin,” which are all assaults on the South Asian diaspora. Thus, a question considered innocent by the person asking it, results in splintering an already fractured Brown body—relegating and subjugating the body of colour even further. Therefore, it is less about “Where are you from?” as a query of curiosity, and more about the underlying posturing of “You are not from here” that categorizes borders out of invisible lines. This line of questioning inadvertently claims the “Other” as inherently from somewhere else, somewhere less civilized, and less modernized, and as Ang (1993) puts it, inevitably deviant.

“Go back to where you came from”

he whispers, nam-ass-stay
 hands clasped together.
 a sinister mantra chanted,
 lines he learned on
 some boat-ride in a dream
 before he already said,
 Konichiwa, bowing down
 to Chinese immigrants
 he confused for Japanese.
 cherry blossoms he once
 added to his repertoire
 of another foreign tongue
 to welcome to this land.
 lips sealed with such hate
 when really all he meant
 was to say, go home.

What also makes the question of “Where are you from?” so incendiary is that it operates on assumptions, which are sometimes postulated in the form of a statement, rather than a question. For example, I am often greeted by strangers with the assumption that I am Muslim, although I am an atheist, and my family members are Hindu. While this does not bother me, the assumptions carry racial undertones because the reading of my Brown skin places me as something that I am not. Said differently, filled with an archive

of assumptions, no matter how well intentioned, are the hurried salutations, always butchered, that categorize people into identities that are falsely attributed. A few years earlier, I remember the words "You do not look Indian" being expressed to me. To not look Indian, in its inchoate form, is a remark that momentarily descends me into a suspension of unspeaking, where I am unable to respond as I cling to the edge of bewilderment. In that same year, to someone else, I am Arab and to another person I am of South American descent. I mouth out "nam-ass-stay" and that seems to put an end to their perplexity around my "Indian-ness." Without that, the questions that are rifled in succession, or rather the incursion, would never cease.

When these assumptions and questions, falsely framed as innocuous, are challenged, another form of exhaustion takes place; when references of "Canada" as being racist are mentioned, further assaults arise. Immediately or shortly after, "Go back to where you came from" or other statements that caricaturize that sentiment become the response. The vulture, turning its mouth from preying to unleashing, turns into a vociferous racist and launches into an attack. While racists fill their hunger, the stomach churns differently for me. It vomits fear. Even when empty it trembles. There are always reminders that "foreignness" defiles the anatomy of humanhood. For many first- and second-generation South Asians, these experiences of fracturing are accompanied by memories of "performing" so-called "Canadian-ness" to survive. To, so to speak, escape insults of "Go back to where you came from," hurled at the assumed immigrant body. Emergent in this slippage are the navigations of culture and religion (Alvi, 2020). And in that navigation is the imagination of the racialized body (Ahmed, 2013), a body that comes to be the landscape of materialization by being related to other bodies, as a product that reels in a focalization of whiteness. In the case of so-called Canada, performing Canadian-ness means to perform in relation to the white body that is deemed to be at the centre and therefore more "Canadian" than everyone else, as Ausman (2011) reminds me that to be otherwise means to be at the fringes.

"You are not from here"

my mother folds saris into cupboards
hides letters and photos in between fabric

she holds onto old passports that turn brown
for all the memories she cannot let go

in a piece of furniture that closets her entire world,
what other parts of herself does she hide?

Reading Alvi (2020), barely clinging to the margins, I come to be aware that my own family has a history of engaging in a performance of "being Canadian" to fit in. Drifting in this thought, I cannot do so without realizing the split that my parents must feel. Although my mother has now been in so-called Canada for almost 30 years, the content of the words in these poems remains a part of her experience. In her own way, she survives—or learns to disguise parts of her culture and identity—in a place that strips everything away from her. And there is a part of this ritual, mainly by observing, that is passed onto her children. Namely, to hide the Indian-ness away from the space of whiteness. It is never articulated as such, but there are some actions that require no words. These are moments where the immigrant imagination dies

before it even lives, but such killing of the cultural or religious bearing is a form of protection. For the South Asian child, this act of hiding or leaving behind parts of the homeland, as a way of “passing” elsewhere, is precocious. It has an intergenerational impact (Alvi, 2020), carried from one generation to the next. In that attempt of passing an identity, to survive means to be less present, more absent in Brownness. As such, my family and I engage in a process of assimilation, which involves losing ourselves to something else, and to annihilate our own culture to take on that of someone else’s (Prashad, 2000).

This hiding, and even losing oneself, of being Brown, being South Asian, is trafficked in a sense of shame. Rushdie (1983) captures the feelings of shame that perforate South Asian households:

Wherever I turn, there is something of which to be ashamed. But shame is like everything else; live with it for long enough and it becomes part of the furniture... You can find shame in every house, burning in an ashtray, hanging framed upon a wall, covering a bed. But nobody notices it any more. (p. 21)

It comes in moments of never wearing Indian clothes unless necessary, namely for a religious ceremony or wedding, only to hurry back home to bury it into another memory. It means to be wary of “acting” too Brown or too Indian. In that same way, my family and I have cultivated a life around shame, and eventually the disappearing act is such that it becomes almost intrinsic and unnoticeable. For the South Asian diasporic, and for other people of colour, countering Canadian-ness means being categorically “Othered” and living with fraught tensions at a riving hyphenation—one that requires a hiding of sorts. That “performance” of hiding and unhiding, an engagement of rituals that Pariyadath (2019) identifies as journeying back and forth between homes, is known to many South Asians.

From “here” to there to fear

every street corner you pass
is another assault you escape

every traffic light you wait upon
are seconds and minutes of agony

every time you leave the house
is a memory that fresh air is a privilege

that to take a breath, to speak of life,
is a burden that you carry forever

Like my parents, I also learn to assimilate, to live outside of fear. I try to “hide” the Brownness, the Indianness, the South Asian-ness. From the way I dress to the way I talk, I attempt to not reveal myself, but something—mostly likely my Brown skin—betrays me. No matter how much South Asians, particularly first-generation immigrants, attempt to perform, followed by shame at every corridor, they are reminded of the following: “South Asian immigrants are astutely aware that they are here for their labor and not to create their lives” (Badrudjoja, 2006, p. 7). In that reality, the “Go back where you come from” as an insult turns into a threat. Aware of this, there is a constant fear of slipping that is steeped in this ventriloquism of passing and its performance. This slippage is harrowed in moments of not

performing, where a person of colour breaks from hiding their culture and religion. It can be eviscerating otherwise. In knowing that, identity becomes a place of ongoing negotiation and tension (Alvi, 2020), which includes passing to survive. Striking another poem allows me to grapple with why passing and performing are so critical to how we move through the world, even when engaging in acts of everyday living. Furthermore, in this is the reality that South Asians and others ascribed as racialized immigrants are bound by a politics of disposability, wherein there is not only a reminder that being relegated “back to where you came from” is always a menacing reality, but that living is filled with precarity. Death is a constant reminder merely because you exist, and your body can be easily discarded and murdered.

“Fresh off the boat”

lodged into a river of memories,
flooded by the shipwreck, I wonder,
what is fresh about water that swims in dead bodies?

In addition to straying away from my culture and identity in order to fit in (Cheryan & Monin, 2005), I regret using the derogatory term of “fresh off the boat” (FOB), which is often ascribed onto racialized immigrants. In high school, along with other South Asian students, I would use the term, especially in reference to my parents or people like my parents, to indicate a way of being that fails to assimilate to the dominant culture. I make this admission because the remnants of “Go back to where you came from” are even more haunting for those who are “visibly” South Asian, or any other body perceived to be racialized, by way of culture, language, and religion. Whereas I can often pass in white spaces (Alvi, 2020), other South Asians are subject to the fresh off the boat racial microaggression (Poolokasingham et al., 2014). The accent, or the supposed Indian accent, readily sullies the performance. Thus, the very “accented” English that is spoken, described as incomprehensible (Shuck, 2004) and “heavy” (Chand, 2009), betrays the speaker who seeks to pass by without trouble. For the Indian accent that is ascribed onto the entire South Asian expanse, it is often the /v/ pronounced for [w] that has been iconic to Indian English (Chand, 2009), which has been appropriated and ridiculed. Usually, only one word is needed to reveal that, when “what” is heard as “vat” and the English that rolls out differently becomes subject to callous criticism. The racialized immigrant, in this case the first-generation South Asian, as read through the colonizer’s eyes, is thus reprimanded for expressions that are “fobbish” (Pyke, 2010). Again, coded in this remark, asserted in an accusation of fugitivity, is the violent threat that one can be “shipped back” elsewhere, and whether the boat sails without drowning is left unanswered. Its use—my use of it—feeds into the narrative of “Go back to where you came from.”

The Return to (Home)land and Its Tensions

Never enough for both

i am two rivers
in one ocean

plenty water,
overflowing

but still
drying out

What complicates the conversation around (be)longing and identity is that the “elsewhere” space is also contested. The search for (home)land is felt in the inadequacy of not being enough of something. It posits me as neither here nor there. When I visit India, for example, my relatives there view me as being from outside of India. To them, I do not embody what it means to be Indian because I come across and behave as a Canadian. For the diasporic like myself, especially children of immigrants born and raised outside of the homeland, the performance of Canadian-ness is not seen, at least not there and then, as a form of survival by family members living in the homeland. Those Brown spaces render us as “whitewashed” and doing “white people” things (Alvi, 2020). These assertions, however, are not piqued in problematics necessarily. Rather, it comes from a history of wanting a “better life” among a people grappling with the lies of post-colonialism, and so the image of a plump, apparently well-fed Canadian whose parents left the village is an example, at least as much as imagery allows, of a life free from poverty. Nonetheless, the insinuation still hurts. It is no surprise then that the homeland that I dream of becomes another site of contention, navigation, and troubled territory.

At the same time, my relatives in India do not necessarily view me as “not Indian,” but rather as being less Indian. Thus, it is also less about whether one is from there or not, but whether one is “enough” of the place in question. It is often the perceived “foreignness” that explicates the “enough-ness” of the diasporic. For me, it is my “accent” that betrays me. In a rickshaw, as I speak broken Hindi, the driver turns to ask me the dreaded “Are you from here?” question that has come to travel with me. Built into the mechanics of that curiosity, I am yet again at a standstill. Indeed, “we are faced with charred pieces of identification, shards of language, burned tongues, and cultural fragments” (Seyhan, 2001, p. 7). When those fragments make me a tourist in my own homeland, weaving me into a depth of unbelonging that descends ceaselessly, the diasporic in me wonders if living at the hyphens is always a site of being distant, removed from the homeland.

When cultures collide

there is no language that I can mouth out
without the edge of a sharpened tongue splintering it

It is not only language, however, that renders me not enough when I am in India. That excision is also laboured in the endowment of being creolized (Cohen, 2007), where two or more cultures and identities

collide to form another, such as the diasporic. For South Asians, instead of that being a merge of authentic identity formation, it is described otherwise. The term “American-Born Confused Desi” or “ABCD,” comes to mind. Having been born outside of South Asia, the diasporic body is categorically confused. In other words, they are meant to feel a sense of cultural inadequacy (Prashad, 2000). While it has been more recently reframed, with second-generation South Asians reclaiming the term by rephrasing it as “American-Born Confused Desi Emigrated From Gujarat House In Jersey Kids Learning Medicine Now Owning Property Quite Reasonable Salary Two Uncles Visiting White Xenophobia Yet Zestful!”, the original history of ABCD is rooted in the intent to delegitimize and reduce the diasporic South Asian. Furthermore, it acts as a counterpart to FOB (Badrudjoja, 2006), while seeking to undermine the corporality of Indian-ness from its cultural and embodied attachment. Through that detachment, the question of “What is Indian about you?” emerges (Das Gupta, 1997). In that way, pressed against the question of being enough as an Indian, I am, as a diasporic South Asian, relegated, even if fleetingly, in what Paudel (2019) calls nowhere-ness. So, if I am from nowhere, where is my home?

If neither here nor there, where is home?

a broken mother tongue slips out
spills heavy in water onto draught filled soil

Like a splintering thread, the disconnected, outcasted diasporic body starts to come undone. This takes form in the search for “Where is home?” that follows me everywhere. It is those cupboards and suitcases, even years later, that I am rummaging through, as a part of the detached diaspora in search for home. It is the pain-stricken feeling of never being enough of something. There is dislocation that comes from this process of dispersion (Bhabha, 1994), where complexities about “home” surface from the question of “Where are you from?” (Badrudjoja, 2006). It is that very interrogation, at least for me, which makes the place of home, as a construction of seeking out (be)longing and identity, difficult to imagine. An engagement of being unhomely, as the experience of not feeling at home (Paudel, 2019), strangles me through the neither here nor there feeling.

Through this poetic inquiry, however, home reaches me in a new way. According to Brah (1996), home is an experience that is lived. The author explains that the yearning for home is not necessarily a return to the homeland, as much as it is a longing for home. Thus, the diaspora is not necessarily “tied to the homeland or the past” (Canagarajah & Silberstein, 2012, p. 81). Instead, borrowing the words of Zhang (2004), I gravitate to re-homing and seek to “reconstruct home by moving beyond boundaries” (Paudel, 2019, p. 71). So, while the notion of home is riddled for the South Asian diasporic, and is both complex and contradictory (Shukla, 2001), I cannot be bordered. There is no map that can constrain me. There are no bounds that can trap me into an atlas. Even today, for some, I will never be enough. I will always be from somewhere else. Heeding the words of Zebian (2021), however, I do not build a home in other people. Nor am I interested in “always being in the waiting room of the nation-space” (Dayal, 1996, p. 51). Instead, I am making a home that is inspired by Brah’s (1996) poignant words:

[H]ome is also the lived experience of locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excited of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day...all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations. In other words, the varying experience of the pains and pleasures, the terrors and contentments, or the highs and humdrum of everyday lived culture that marks how, for example, a cold winter night might be differently experienced sitting by a crackling fireside in a mansion as compared with standing huddled around a makeshift fire on the streets of nineteenth-century England. (p. 189)

It is that, with the depths of poetics which captures my own experiences as a South Asian diasporic, that brings me home, and I am back to the photography of a land near my father's village. If I look closely enough, I can see myself there, running freely and without trepidation of someone asking me the question, "Where are you from?"

Final Thoughts: A Map Is Only One Story

no trace of maps
no boundaries
no borders

my home
is written on me
like constellations in the sky

In breathing this poetic inquiry, a territory of both fear and hunger lingers at the inroad of a hyphenated diasporic like myself in search of a home, not simply as place for the displaced, but as a longing for the feeling of homeliness. For one, there is that exigency of belonging to somewhere, to any map that plateaus me to feeling less homely, and maybe towards journeying to a homeland that yearns for me, as I do for it. Located elsewhere, however, I am terrified of being Indian, South Asian, and Brown. Every contour of the homeland that rests on my body, whether on the text or within its depths, always "maps" me as unwanted. When that territorialization happens, I trace the following words:

When the colonialists came, they committed our edges to paper; they tried to cage us with their borders. A country is impossible to contain; a people are impossible to boil to the silt of parchment. A map is only one story. It is not the most important story. The most important story is the one a people tell about themselves. (Osman, 2020, p. 19)

It is these words that I repeat over and over again. A map is only one story. A map is only one story. A. Map. Is. Only. One. Story.

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